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From Springville to Hollywood: local musician Rick Denzien's rise to fame

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Michael Ronstadt and Rick Denzien

He's recorded with the family of world-famous Linda Ronstadt. He owns his own recording studio in Philadelphia. He's been nominated for Best New Recording Artist.

And he grew up right here in Springville.

Rick Denzien has really given his hometown something to be proud of. The Springville-GI graduate has traveled far and wide in his lengthy career, but has never forgotten where he came from. "There was so much beauty there. I loved it," he said, of Springville. "The way that the hills are in Boston and on Ganesee Road. We used to live up on Transit Line Road - and it overlooked the 219 extension and you could see all the way to Collins Center from there. I loved the way it looked and the whole idea of being out in nature. I just thought that I was lucky to be in an area like that."

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Although he now calls Philadelphia home, Denzien still owes many fond memories of his time growing up in Springville. One of the most notable is a break-in of the old S-GI building between Main and Franklin streets by him and classmate Don Cooley when they were high school freshmen. While inside the building in the dead of night, the two boys grabbed some souvenirs, including a three-foot-high skeleton that Denzien said "would go nicely with the coffin that [he] built in shop class." Although their guilty consciences forced Denzien and Cooley to return the items several days later, they narrowly escaped being caught by police who were raiding a drug party in that same building. "That could have been us," Denzien commented. "It was very, very Stephen King kind of creepy."

But life wasn't all fun and games and escapades for Denzien. He grew up attending the First Baptist Church in what is now Springville Center for the Arts, and there he was baptized.

At age 16 he picked up a guitar after several failed attempts to learn how to play that instrument, and says he "finally got hit with lightning. I started writing

songs then - it all just happened at the same time."

Not looking back, Denzien continued with pursuing his love of music, citing his lineage for his deep involvement. His maternal uncle, the late Charles Pierce, was a jazz musician, and his mother Carole sings and plays piano. Denzien himself is a singer, lyricist, singer and guitarist. He says that, during his senior year of high school at S-GI, he rarely spent a school period studying anything other than music.

But when it came time for college, Denzien went a direction most did not foresee; he studied for his bachelor's degree in religion/philosophy and psychology at Roberts Wesleyan College in Rochester. "Music and music ministry was always part of the whole thing for me at the beginning," he said, and, in fact, continues to include Christian music in his repertoire. But he said the reason he went with the major he did was because a lot of the classically-trained musicians he has come in contact with do well at reading music, but cannot improvise. "I think that's a shame because they are actually better trained," he said, "but that one element of the musical aspect isn't flexed at all. So they can't do what a lot of musicians can do."

But he never forgot what his long-term goal was. "My last year in college my sister got me into the tonmeister (recording engineer) program at Fredonia State," he said. "I spent that year going back and forth between Rochester and Fredonia learning and recording. I pretty much did everything possible to learn something and do something with the skills."

After college, Denzien spent a brief time in Atlanta doing some writing and recording, before taking up permanent residence in Philadelphia. "Starting in Philly was very tough," he said. "I didn't really know anyone." He began working with a local recording studio, but quickly became fed up with their shoddy work, and thought to himself, "I can screw up my own stuff for cheaper than this." He adds, "So out of that frustration [my] studio was born." He now owns and operates Boffo Recording Studio in Ambler, Pa., and "independently writes, records, markets and distributes his material through the Slot-1 independent recording label."

Through his studio, Denzien has worked with many well-known names in the music industry, including Michael Ronstadt (Linda Ronstadt's nephew), Ronstadt Generations, Australian band FRUIT, the band from Late Night with David Letterman, American Idol finalist Justin Guarini, Craig Bickhardt and many more, also working with major labels such as Columbia Records.

In 2007, Denzien was nominated for AC Breakthrough Artist of the Year and Best New Recording Artist for his hit song "Tsai." Part of that song reads, "You're a mystery, you're a guide - yeah Tsai - you're a mystery."

Denzien says that the woman referred to in this song came to him in a dream. "The next morning I wrote the song," he said.

When he was told that he had been nominated and invited to attend the New Music Awards show, Denzien says he felt numb. "Most people have no idea how difficult it really is to make an impact on the industry," he said. This award is sponsored by the radio industry, and voted on by radio stations, program directors, music directors and disk jockeys. The ceremony was held in the Avalon Theater in Hollywood, Calif.

Many other famous individuals in the music industry nominated at the same show included Maroon 5, Avril Lavigne, John Mayer, Justin Timberlake, Kelly Clarkson, Daughtry and many more.

On April 30, Denzien is treating Springville to a gig at the Center for the Arts. Joining him on stage is Michael Ronstadt of Ronstadt Generations. Denzien has worked extensively with that family and says, "They are professionals all the way. The Ronstadt Generations sounds amazing. It is in their blood." Of Michael, he adds, "This cat sits down with me and we go to town together."

Old friend Barb Bohnenberg, long-time volunteer at SCA, asked Denzien to come and play in Springville, and he jumped at the opportunity. "I've known Ricky for like 35 years and he is a great friend of the family," Bohnenberg said. She herself is a retired music teacher, playing keyboard and writing music. "She is a super great player and I hope she sits in on a song with us," Denzien said. "She's an amazing player herself."

Bohnenberg is preparing the center for the big event and says she is excited to have one of the only first baptist church-baptized performers play once again in his native church. Denzien and Michael Ronstadt will be joined on-stage with a backup band, as well as Debra Lee of Lyra Project.

"It's a love story," Denzien said, of how he happened to begin working with Lee. "The first time I saw her was before a show, and it was love at first sight. I didn't even know she could sing." The two started the Lyra Project together, which was produced by Denzien's studio. "She's a great singer, songwriter and vocal coach," he added.

Denzien says he is excited to be coming back to Springville - and especially so to spend time with his father, who still lives in the area. Before they show up in town, Denzien and his group will also perform at Nietzsche's in Buffalo on the 28th.

The Springville native is currently working on finishing his CD, RADIATE, but he adds, "You're trying to make a living and pay all the bills and you never have any extra to spend on yourself." But he hopes to finish that CD very soon.

For more information on Denzien, visit www.rickdenzien.com or youtube.com/rickdenzien. Find out more about the Ronstads at michaelronstadt.com.

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